

# Public space, culture and immigrants in the Trump Era. San Francisco California

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## Abstract

In response to the political line raised by Trump, a series of actions are generated in order to encourage the social inclusion of migrants in several cities in the United States, this through the use of art and culture as precursors of resistance and defense of human rights.

## Keywords

Culture; immigrants; Trump; San Francisco.

In December 2016, just a few weeks after Donald Trump's electoral triumph as president of the United States of America, the House of Representatives of the state of North Carolina, which has a Republican majority, approved the HB2 law, which eliminates the civil rights for LGBTQ groups. Although the decision of the chamber was a response to several political factors set as an early reaction to the arrival of Roy Cooper, a Democrat governor, it also responds to the propaganda and subsequent executive laws against the rights of some minorities, that the president of the United States promotes since his candidacy.

However, what does this kind of decision have to do with public space and with Mexicans residing in San Francisco, California?

If you add to this measure the tougher stance of immigration policies and statements against women's rights, young "Dreamers", and the constant threats made by President Trump of conducting detention operations targeting undocumented people, then some stances taken by institutions such as the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, become remarkable. This musical ensemble decided to cancel its North Carolina tour and instead use that budget to invite the Jalisco Philharmonic Orchestra as a resident orchestra. The objective was to show they were an inclusive organization, and become a safe space for the immigrant community, as well as to show their political position in tune with the values of the Sanctuary Cities, promoted by the mayor's office.



With this motion, the Mexican community in San Francisco found a safe space where their identity was exalted through the music of Revueltas, Moncayo, Márquez and the young Jalisco composer Javier Álvarez. More than 2000 attendees saturated the room. The audience reports, presented by the Davies Symphony Hall weeks later, affirm that 40% of the attendees were a new audience, meaning it was the first time they attended a symphony concert at that venue. The results of this event exceeded any expectation, an achievement executed through the international coordinated efforts made by the Consulate of Mexico in San Francisco, the Secretaría de Cultura de Jalisco, the support of Mexico's Marca País office, and both Mexican and American private sectors.

The reaction by other cultural institutions in the City of San Francisco soon multiplied. The interest of programming and promoting different icons of Mexican identity (in many cases of assimilated images or the own interpretation made by each institution) acts as a clear recognition of the power of culture as a tool for social inclusion and political resistance. This situation is viable in the United States because most cultural institutions do not depend of the federal budget and therefore can act more freely, responding directly to their audiences and board of directors.

The mission of organizing a vast cultural program to meet an imminent need: the conquering of public spaces as safe areas for Mexican migrants, led by the Consulate General of Mexico, quickly echoed in the City and its cultural institutions.

That summer, the Stern Grove Park offered a free public concert for more than 10,000 people with the famous Mexican band *Los Angeles Azules*, an activity that was part of the fourth edition of the MEXAM festival, which in eight days held activities in collaboration with fifteen venues of the City of San Francisco and its surroundings.



Figure 1. *Los Angeles Azules* Concert in Stern Grove. Image: ©Anastacia Green, courtesy of the Consulate General of Mexico in San Francisco, 2017.



The festival also included talent born in the United States, with the aim of positioning the contributions of the millions of Mexican immigrants who, as part of the Mexico-United States bicultural integration, are transforming their areas of expertise and showing original content to the world. There was also a forum with talented young "Dreamers" in collaboration with the ABC television network and the De Young Museum. The 2017 edition of the MEXAM festival attracted more than 23 thousand spectators, a number that responds to the conquest of public spaces.

In September 2017, the Museum of Fine Arts of San Francisco opened the exhibition Teotihuacan: City of Gods, City of Water, that in spite of being a project that took more than eight years to arrange along with the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), the historical moment gave it an unprecedented political twist.

It is important to recognize the work of the community in the appropriation of public space. Festivities such as "*Día de los Muertos*" or el "*Carnaval*", which the City of San Francisco has been celebrating for 25 to 40 years respectively, are already part of the city's cultural calendar. The events gather more than 50,000 people in the streets, and are carried out and executed by the Latin American community. In the past five years, these events have sought to be the most powerful manifestation of tradition, in the face of the gentrification that threatens to evict migrant communities in order to be replaced by the Tech corporates and young people with a high purchasing power.

In 2018, the City of San Francisco incorporated the name of Frida Kahlo to one of its streets; opened the doors of the historical building of the mayor's office to carry out a cultural night for the Mexican Independence Day; and declared the 24th Street corridor as part of the city's cultural heritage, an icon of Latin American identity because it contains the murals of the Chicano movement and commercial establishments.

In addition, the project for the Mexican Museum, carried out by the private initiative in agreement with the City, and located on a strategic spot in the cultural circuit, will open its doors in 2020.

Another institution that also raised its voice through actions is the Museum of Modern Art of San Francisco, SFMOMA. Following the signing of executive actions banning the entry to the US of people from certain countries of Muslim origin, the museum made an exhibition with pieces from its collection belonging to artists of the banned countries. As for the curatorship of Mexican art, the museum placed its Mexican art collection in their main exhibition room. For 2020, they are preparing a great retrospective about Diego Rivera, a project that will undoubtedly dialogue and play with the public space.

However, the conquest of public space as a tool of cultural diplomacy was already a tradition in the City of San Francisco, sometimes promoted by private initiative and artists, as was the case of Diego Rivera, who was invited in 1931 to make murals in public buildings. He painted two murals in San Francisco, one at the stairs of the City Club (former Stock Exchange Tower) and another in the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI, website). In 1940, as part of the Golden Gate International Exposition, he was invited again to create the mural entitled "*Unidad Panamericana*" for the international fair. José Miguel Covarrubias was also summoned to this event and painted six panels with the theme of the riches of the Pacific (Russel, 2008).





Figure 2. Diego Rivera Pan American Unity Mural. Image: courtesy of ©San Francisco College, 2006.

On other occasions, the Mexican community and diplomatic representations promoted cultural diplomacy, as in 1963 when the Mexican community donated a bronze statue of Miguel Hidalgo made by the artist Juan F. Olaguíbel, creator of Mexico City's famous "Diana Cazadora". In addition, in 1966, the Government of Mexico presented a replica of the *Campana de Dolores*, a gesture of friendship and acknowledgement for the Mexican communities who reside in the Mission neighborhood. Both sculptures were placed in the iconic public space known as Dolores Park (San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, 2011).

Cultural international cooperation has always been an imminent need, materialized by the initiatives developed collaboratively between local governments and US institutions; groups of artists and the local community; as well as a long tradition of public diplomacy from Mexico's local representation. These have manifested through the donation of cultural heritage such as sculptures, busts and pre-Columbian replicas, or by taking advantage of the legacy of renowned artists such as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Tamayo, Covarrubias, among others.



Figure 3. Frida Kahlo Street. Image: ©San Francisco Chronical.



Today, the immigration policies and communication ways of President Donald Trump have generated fear in the most vulnerable communities, affecting their health, economic activities and freedom of transit. Facing this reality, art and culture have proven to be resistance mechanisms, and cities like San Francisco have taken the social and political responsibility to counteract the messages of exclusion, segregation and racism that come from the White House.

While the challenges that the Mexican population face in San Francisco on issues such as housing, access to education and health services are of primary interest, carrying out events and cultural activities in the public space have proven to be a powerful tool for social integration. They have become the binding "soft power" that opens lines for dialogue and inclusion.

Cultural diplomacy, artistic promotion and the conservation of cultural property abroad, respond to the need of strengthening Mexican identity. They address an intrinsic need to promote human rights, such as the right to culture, free transit and freedom of expression, as well as the enjoyment of liberty.

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